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HOUSEKEEPERS' CHAT

Monday, October 11, 1937

(FOR BROADCAST USE ONLY)

Subject: "KITCHEN CARELESSNESS." Information from the Food and Drug Administration, U. S. Department of Agriculture.

--ooCoo--

Friends, did you ever try making pancakes out of plaster of paris? Neither did I. And I'm not giving you a new cookery hint. I'm giving you the sad keynote to a distressing story -- a case of mistaken identity which might have ended fatally. Fortunately it didn't, but five people in Brooklyn, N.Y., were made very ill.

I have here a newspaper clipping that tells how it happened:

"Five persons became ill last night, when they ate pancakes in which plaster of paris accidentally had been used in place of flour. The plaster of paris, a white, powdery substance similar in appearance and texture to flour, formed a convincing doughlike past when mixed with water and baked into appetizing pancakes. The diners doused the cakes with maple sirup and butter and had eaten several before anyone noticed that something had gone wrong."

Well, all I can think of in this connection is an old recipe for getting rid of water bugs, by mixing the bait with plaster of paris. When the roaches eat the mixture, they are supposed to get thirsty, drink water, and become solidified as soon as the resulting plaster hardens. You can see what was likely to happen to this unfortunate household. However, as the clipping continues:

"An ambulance took the five persons to a hospital, where physicians removed the plaster of paris before it had become set too hard." All's well that ends well, I suppose. The newspaper added that the reason the plaster of paris was in the icebox was that some workman left it behind, some member of the family saw it, and put it in the ice-box. Why the ice-box? Don't ask me. The moral of this tale is not concerned with where a housewife should keep her flour, but with keeping all non-food materials, such as plaster of paris, away from all food materials, especially if they resemble them.

Now, although these people were made very ill, there seems to be only one plaster of paris case. Much more common are the cases of illness due to food poisoning. The majority of them are caused by kitchen carelessness just as inexcusable as that I have just described. Our Washington letter today bears witness to this: (Quoting)

"The Food and Drug officials have been very busy right at home in the District of Columbia, investigating about 100 cases of food poisoning due to eclairs and cream puffs bought from a commercial bakery. They say that the danger of hot weather spoilage for custard filled pastries is well recognized, and that their sale is prohibited in many places during the summer-time.

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But it is less well understood that at any time of year any custard desserts, whether cooked by a bakery or by the housewife in her own kitchen, may be subject to contamination. These foods require very careful handling and proper refrigeration. Otherwise they are ideal culture mediums for all sorts of bacteria, including those which cause food poisoning."

Our correspondent then says she asked Dr. Hunter, of the Food and Drug Administration, whether he would ban cream puffs and eclairs entirely from American tables. He told her that he would not. He would simply ban kitchen carelessness. There is no reason, he said, why fresh custard should not be served if it is promptly cooled, and put in the refrigerator for a few hours until it is wanted. It may then be used as a sauce, or put into cream puffs or eclairs, into a pie shell, or used in any other way desired. Dr. Hunter endorsed our correspondent's suggestion that housewives might try to make custards only on the day when they were to be used, and if they were intended as fillings, that they be kept separately refrigerated and combined with the crisp éclair shell or cream puff or pie shell just before serving.

He explained further that custard-filled desserts are one of the types of moist cooked food to which food poisoning bacteria are especially partial. What holds true for them -- that is, storing them at low temperature in the refrigerator between the time they are cooked and served,-- is also good for any gravies or sauces or cooked meats or fish. He mentioned particularly hashes, croquettes, salads, and sandwich fillings in which the ground meat is mixed with mayonnaise.

I thought when I read this of those little bowls of sandwich spreads which I sometimes fix for a serve-yourself buffet supper. I resolved to use only the  freshest  mixtures the next time I have friends in for one, and to make rather limited quantities of each food so there will be no leftovers to bother with.

Apparently no one knows where certain types of these food poisoning organisms are picked up but if foods are promptly chilled after cooking and kept chilled until used, preferably within a few hours, the bacteria do not have a chance to develop and multiply.

It is true that we hear of more cases of food poisoning in the summer months than in the winter. Maybe this is because we have out-doors picnics and outings, when we carry food long distances, over dusty roads, without refrigeration. Or it may be the warmer out-doors temperatures in summer,-- or even the flies. We do not know. All we can do is to be on the safe side as far as we understand about proper food storage. Kitchens are warm the year around, so the housewife can never relax her vigilance in regard to food care.

Returning to our correspondent's letter, she writes: "This case in Washington is only one of many that have come to the attention of the Food and Drug officials. Food poisoning due to custard mixtures knows neither season nor locality. Kitchen carelessness is the real cause of all of them.

"Here are some fundamental rules: Keep foods free from dirt and from insects or other carriers of micro-organisms. Store all moist or soft cooked food at a temperature below 50 degrees Fahrenheit. Keep it in the refrigerator. If no refrigerator is available, recook the food before serving it, even if it shows no signs of spoilage. Never take a chance on any food with an unusual smell or appearance. Be especially careful with custard mixtures. Prepare custard only as needed, cook it sufficiently, and if you do not service it at once, keep it under refrigeration."

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